



# DECENTRALISATION

## and its Prospects

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Pakistan's struggles with instituting effective decentralisation beyond the provincial tier are well documented. Empowered local governments have generally been a rare aberration, rather than a norm, despite finding mention in the constitution. Ironically, local governments have been used to undercut provincial-tier politics and limit oppositional agitation during times of military rule, and have been kept dysfunctional to consolidate power at the provincial level under civilian dispensations. Overall, the track record on this front is unenviable.

In June 2023, Sindh became the only province out of four to have functional local governments. These too are compromised by the continued ingress of provincially managed authorities in local government/municipal functions such as solid waste management, building control, and public transport. This is similar to past experiences in Punjab and in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The tragedy is that even when local governments are instituted, their mandates are heavily circumscribed.

The case for political and administrative decentralisation appears fairly obvious. As has been stated by several writers, the setting up of any kind of local government system in the country is, by all accounts, a net positive. On the delivery front, it allows for more localised planning and more accountable service provision. It reduces the amount of bureaucratic hoops individuals have to jump through to gain access to the state, and most of all, it makes interfacing with the government easier.

Having one deputy commissioner administering an entire district is infinitely less desirable than having an elected council for each locality.

More precisely, one can hone in on two sets of major benefits of localised administration: Firstly, nobody knows the problems of a community better than that community itself. In a day and age where the average constituency size of a provincial assembly member can cover both rural and urban areas, the chances of engaged and informed representation are close to zero.

Academic research by Zahid Hasnain, Ali Cheema, and others, on local development spending in Pakistan has shown that currently, all outlays made by politicians are hardly ever needs-based and almost always patronage-driven with the explicit view to securing electoral blocs for re-election. It goes without saying that a country facing a whole host of development challenges — many of which need to be resolved through local political processes — cannot really afford such crass patronage politics. An empowered (both fiscally and authority-wise) local body setup representing a few neighborhoods or a village can make community based development possible and at the same time actually allow our provincial and national level legislators to focus on law-making as opposed to fixing roads and water taps.

Secondly, there is the issue of more responsive governance. Electoral accountability is one particular route for people to make governments (local, provincial

cial, or national) responsive, and there are a host of other strategies and instruments available, such as citizen participation in local development, media oversight, court petitions, and public advocacy, all of which require avenues at the level where citizens encounter these issues.

All instruments, voting included, require some manner of political organisation based on a collective projection of interest. Party-based devolution will force political parties to develop grass-roots level linkages and organisational structures to deal with the rough and tumble aspects of local statecraft. By creating channels between Islamabad (or provincial capitals) and the lowest tier of administration, consensus exercises to back policy reform will be possible right down to the household level, and in the same vein, federal and provincial party bosses will be more aware of the issues faced by that elusive person known as 'the average Pakistani'.

While the case for decentralisation is strong, it makes sense to review a few arguments against it as well. It is pertinent to mention that a (mildly) reasonable case for the centralisation of executive authority, especially in province-level bureaucratic actors, does exist.

In the recent past, whether it be an infrastructure project or an immunisation drive, public sector dynamism has relied on exactly this mechanism. A centralised approach, built on a small team of political leaders and bureaucrats overseeing everything from assessment to planning to execution, works well for this project-based idea of governance.

With both domestic and international actors expanding their footprint on local development work, the need for project-based governance appears to have grown even more. To make work, institutional layers need to be removed and the capacity to deliver has to be implanted from above. In this calculus, a district council or a municipal corporation overseeing a historically under-resourced and low-capacity grassroots bureaucracy is viewed as a major hindrance.

It is possible to be somewhat sympathetic to this line of reasoning in so far that issues of capacity at all stages (planning, assessment, and delivery) do plague district-based bureaucracies. Local councils offer the potential to make optimal decisions on allocation of resources, but in many cases they are merely used for small-scale targeting of patronage. The persisting problem of capacity is one that can only be resolved over time, something which many political governments feel they don't have in ample amounts.

Nonetheless, installing trust in local governments and building their institutional capacity to deliver on a shared development vision has to start at some point. Project-based delivery will fall short in both development terms and on the political front. Health and education, for example, are both governance-based problems that cannot be resolved as stand-alone projects of sorts. They require an improvement in institutions and accountability mechanisms, which means investing in the capacities of line departments and their partners at the local level. Centralising authority and creating ad hoc governing arrangements will only act as disabling factors in the long run.

With a case established, what is the political landscape for devolution? The current Article 140-A of the constitution has proved insufficient, as has pressure from the courts. All mainstream parties have either failed to hold elections, or, where these have been held, have seen the withholding of financial and administrative power from the third tier.

There are a number of reasons why mainstream parties are so reluctant to devolve beyond the provincial tier. Absence of party strength at the grassroots and the reliance on local government functions and resources to win provincial and national assembly elections are two important reasons. From another perspective, this reluctance to devolve is also a form of 'class politics'.

The urban and rural upper classes that populate the MPA and MNA tier of politics have no desire to open up a democratic channel that would widen access of other socioeconomic groups.

Given this sub-optimal status quo, the prospects for effective decentralisation are weak. In other contexts, where entrenched interests have been overcome, it has usually been some combination of external pressure and internal demand for reform. External pressure in Pakistan's case comes from the courts, who have periodically taken up the issue of local governments and pressed provincial governments to carry out some exercise. That partly explains the recent elections in Sindh as well. There is also growing advocacy on the civil society front, with a range of initiatives making

Ultimately, an internal push within the political class is what is needed. There are advocates for devolution in every party. Every party has a cadre that has benefitted from devolution in the past and would like that tier of politics to open up. Many party activists know that is the only tier they can reasonably compete at, given how expensive provincial and national assembly elections are. The future for devolution in Pakistan rests on this internal voice growing louder.

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